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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Status of Women Conference

NINA TOTENBERG: The United Nations International Conference on the Status of Women convenes next week in Nairobi, Kenya. The meeting will mark the end of the Decade of Women established by the United Nations in 1975.

NPR's Linda Wertheimer, who will be covering the meeting in Nairobi next week, has this report on the delegation that the United States is sending.

LINDA WERTHEIMER: The President's eldest daughter, Maureen Reagan, will head the United States delegation. According to sources on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, it was she who chose the delegates, refusing to permit congressional leaders to choose their own representatives, even dismissing a group of officials chosen for her by the State Department.

One of the Reagan delegates is Nancy Reynolds, a Washington consultant. Reynolds is a former White House aide who's represented the United States on the U.N. Commission on Women. Reynolds attended the mid-decade Women's Conference in Copenhagen and the planning sessions for the Nairobi meeting. She expects Reagan and her delegation to be a success.

NANCY REYNOLDS: I think a unified, cohesive, educated U.S. delegation, which this one is, with a very strong leader and a very focused, intelligent leader like Maureen Reagan, who is a tough fighter too, will clearly set the standard for why we're going, knowing the odds against us, what we are prepared to deal with, and what we are prepared to negotiate.

WERTHEIMER: Although there was considerable controversy at the beginning about Reagan and her selection of delegates,

most American women concerned about International Women's Year are reasonably satisfied with the delegation.

Arvon Frazier of Minnesota is a former official of the Carter Administration. She was a delegate to the other United Nations Consed the PLO of stalling the peace process. "Nothing meaningful can happen," writes the editor, "until the PLO is ready to announce its representatives to the dialogue with the United States. In the meantime, the whole issue just becomes a question of stalling and marking time."

This is pretty strong language from the PLO's partner in the negotiation, but it's an indication of Jordanian frustration and the difficulty of keeping the fragile momentum in the Middle East peace talks alive.

n. Reagan has included many moderate Republican women and a few moderate Democrats. But she has not chosen a delegation with much experience of international meetings.

Thousands of women will converge on Nairobi to discuss issues affecting women. But as at all U.N. conferences, disputes which regularly occupy the United Nations will also surface: Arab-Israeli relations, South African apartheid.

Reagan has organized extensive and, the delegates say, very solid briefings to prepare the women who will be going to Nairobi, better preparation, conference observers say, than other delegations have had. Reagan has made a special effort to prepare novice delegates for the contentious atmosphere of U.N. debate. Nancy Reynolds says women have been warned:

REYNOLDS: About the terrible things they're going to hear about this country, about the U.S., I mean, and about how there is such hatred in the United Nations against Israel, our only friends. And when we defend Israel, as we do at every occasion, they bash us, they bash Israel, they bash our allies, and we're outvoted and outnumbered. And that's very -- it makes people angry, it makes them frustrated.

And so we tried to prepare the delegation for those angers.

WERTHEIMER: Some of the best known of the American delegates will not be going to Nairobi. Senator Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas will remain in Washington at the Senate. Former U.N. Ambasssador Jeane Kirkpatrick, probably the best known delegate to the international community, will be in France writing a book, and will come only if she is summoned. Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler will attend. And depending upon congressional schedules, so will Congresswomen Lindy Boggs of

Louisiana, a Democrat, and Republican Marjorie Holt of Maryland.

A number of high-ranking appointees of the Reagan Administration are also on the delegation, as well as elected officials or potential candidates from the states.

Alan Keys is the only man on the delegation. A trusted colleague of former Ambassador Kirkpatrick's at the United Nations, where he represents the United States on the Economic and Social Council. Keys is known at the U.N. for his tough talk. He is expected to be Reagan's right-hand man at the Nairobi meeting, and that has raised expectations that Maureen Reagan plans some tough talk of her own.

Nancy Reynolds says Reagan will be prepared on issues like the treatment of women who are refugees to take a hard line with the Soviet Union, if necessary.

REYNOLDS: The emphasis has always been on the condition of women, Palestinian women in occupied territories. But, you see, the condition of women in Cambodia and in Afghanistan have never been emphasized. And while we are concerned about the condition of women refugees everywhere, we are also emphasizing, much to the distress of our Eastern Bloc friends, especially the U.S.S.R., that the condition of women refugees in Kampuchea, or Cambodia, as it was called, and in Afghanistan need as much attention as women refugees in Africa and in the -- and the PLO.

WERTHEIMER: Arvon Frazier, who was a delegate at two Women's Conferences, points out that Maureen Reagan may not be ready to take on the Soviet Union in the politics of the United Nations, as former Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick has done.

FRAZIER: If she does, I think she'll have real trouble. There's a real skill to that. If she becomes too confrontational and looks like she's just really her father's spokeswoman and sort of making trouble on the political issues -- say, arms control, or whatever -- that's going to backfire because a lot of women feel this conference ought to be devoted to women's issues.

WERTHEIMER: Whatever Maureen Reagan's hopes for personal, or possibly political, successes from confrontation at the Nairobi meeting, both Frazier and Reynolds emphasize that the United Nations politics prevent the United States from accomplishing very much in public debate. But both hope for behind-the-scenes accomplishment.

Interestingly, both women say the personal experience of meeting with women from around the world has changed their own lives. Both expect the women officeholders and policymakers attending to be personally and professionally affected by what happens in Nairobi.